

NCA

VOC FOR IOP/FN
BACKGROUNDER 1-0565
DAVID LENT/ROME

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ITALIAN COMMUNISTS ON ELECTIONS

ANNCR:

ITALY'S SLOW-MOTION POLITICAL CRISIS IS BEGINING TO PICK UP SPEED -- AND EARLY ELECTIONS TO RESOLVE THE IMPASSE ARE NOW CONSIDERED LIKELY. VOA'S ROME CORRESPONDENT DAVID LENT HAS THIS REPORT ON THE APPROACH OF THE ITALIAN COMMUNIST PARTY TO THE ELECTIONS.

VOICE:

ON THE FACE OF IT -- THE ITALIAN COMMUNISTS SHOULD BE PUMPING FOR EARLY ELECTIONS. THEY APPEAR TO HAVE NOTHING TO LOSE, IN VIEW OF THE FACT THAT THE CHRISTIAN DEMOCRATS ARE NOW DEEPLY SPLIT ON THE ABORTION ISSUE, ON ECONOMIC POLICY, AND ARE LABORING UNDER CHARGES OF CORRUPTION.

BUT THE EVIDENCE IS THAT THE ITALIAN COMMUNISTS HAVE BEEN PURSUING A MUCH MORE CAUTIOUS POLICY. AT LEAST THE COMMUNIST PARTY HAS BEEN UNWILLING TO ACCEPT RESPONSIBILITY FOR BRINGING EARLY ELECTIONS ABOUT.

COMMUNIST LEADER ENRICO BERLINGUER REPEATED AT A RALLY IN ROME SATURDAY EVENING HIS CALL FOR AN OBLIQUE APPROACH TO POWER. HE URGED AN AGREEMENT WITH THE CHRISTIAN DEMOCRATS BY WHICH THE COMMUNISTS WOULD ASSUME A NATIONAL POLICY-MAKING ROLE WITHOUT PARTICIPATION IN THE GOVERNMENT -- THUS STAVING OFF ELECTIONS UNTIL NEXT YEAR. IT WOULD BE HARD TO ARGUE THAT MISTER BERLINGUER REALLY EXPECTED A POSITIVE RESPONSE FROM THE CHRISTIAN DEMOCRATS.

MISTER BERLINGUER HAD AN EXPLANATION FOR WHY HIS PARTY IS NOT ACTIVELY SEEKING EARLY ELECTIONS. "WE BELIEVE," HE

SAID, "THAT THE GENERAL INTERESTS OF THE COUNTRY MUST COME BEFORE PARTY INTERESTS -- AND WE ARE WORRIED ABOUT THE RISKS OF LEAVING THE LIRA AND OUR ECONOMY TO SINK FOR ANOTHER TWO OR THREE MONTHS." -- THAT IS, FOR THE DURATION OF AN ELECTION CAMPAIGN.

MISTER BERLINGUER'S EXPLANATION SEEMS SKILLFULLY DESIGNED TO BOOST THE IMAGE OF THE PARTY AS SELFLESSLY PERFORMING ONLY IN ITALY'S INTEREST. THE COMMUNIST LEADERSHIP APPEARS TO FEEL THAT MORE TIME IS NEEDED TO CONSOLIDATE COMMUNIST VICTORIES IN LAST YEAR'S REGIONAL ELECTIONS. IN ANY CASE, MISTER BERLINGUER HAS CONSISTENTLY TRIED TO DEMONSTRATE A COMMUNIST PARTY ROLE IN LOCAL GOVERNMENTS AND PERHAPS IN NATIONAL POLICY-MAKING WHICH WOULD BE PERCEIVED -- AT HOME AND ABROAD -- AS CONSTRUCTIVE.

THE BERLINGUER POLICY -- IT IS SAID IN ROME -- IS TO AVOID ANOTHER "CHILE." THE COMMUNIST LEADER IS ADVOCATING NO QUICK LEFTIST MOVE TO POWER WHICH COULD UNLEASH A RIGHTWING COUP DETAT -- BUT INSTEAD A HISTORIC COMPROMISE -- THAT IS, AN EASING INTO POWER IN COOPERATION WITH ITALY'S CHRISTIAN DEMOCRATS.

AT THIS POINT, EARLY ELECTIONS SEEM UNAVOIDABLE. BUT THE COMMUNISTS HAVE MADE SURE THAT AS A CRUCIAL ELECTION CAMPAIGN IS ABOUT TO BEGIN -- THEY CANNOT BE HELD RESPONSIBLE FOR CREATING THE POLITICAL CRISIS.

JS/CAK